



## How Parents Can Help Children Develop a Positive Body Image

By Michelle Miller, PsyD

With the growing popularity of technology, such as smart phones and tablets, among youth, children have more exposure to the media than ever before. This includes the frequent portrayal of unrealistic body images as the ideal and mixed messages about food and diet. Decades of research have shown that exposure to images from the media is associated with many negative effects on youth, including higher rates of body dissatisfaction and eating disorder symptoms. Unfortunately, many parents don't recognize how their approach to eating and body image can strongly influence the way that children perceive what they see in the media.

When parents make family meals a highly valued time, they foster many positive eating habits in their children. Having regular home cooked meals as a family can benefit children's intake of nutritional foods and support family relationships. Many parents create this time by setting the expectation that all family members must have dinner together throughout most of the week and that all technology is left away from the table. It can also benefit children if parents avoid any heated conversations or arguments at this time, as well as when they encourage family members to take the time to savor their meals. In addition, parents can help children appreciate their meals and family time more by cooking with them.

There are constant changes in what food is considered "healthy" or "unhealthy" through the media, but, with the exception of diagnosed food allergies, most foods can be incorporated into one's diet. When parents demonize any type of food in front of their child, such as through describing it as "bad" or "unhealthy," they increase negative emotions such as guilt and anxiety around food. Parents can promote more positive feelings about food by providing their children with a varied diet that balances different food groups while also promoting eating in moderation. Children should also be supported when they recognize when they are full, rather than telling them that they must complete all food on their plate. This will help teach children to listen to their bodies. It's also important for children to see their parents model those behaviors themselves and limit talking about dieting.

Similarly, parents should also avoid talking negatively about their own body or the bodies of others. Even when parents have insecurities about their bodies, they can promote a positive body image in their children by focusing instead on what they do like about their body in terms of looks and function. Negative descriptions of bodies, such as "fat" or "chubby," should not be used. Most of parents' language

related to body image should be primarily positive remarks about how people look and other positive qualities that they notice people possess.

Asking children about their thoughts and feelings about their body image is an important first step to understanding how the images that they see in the media are affecting them. Although parents may be tempted to immediately address any incorrect assumptions that children have, first allowing them to fully express their opinions enables them to feel heard. When parents take more time to listen to their child's views and validate their feelings, their children will listen more to them when they provide information on the media.

Parents can also promote exercise as a fun experience for children. It has great benefits for children's health and relationships when their parents spend time engaging with them in different forms of exercise that they know their children enjoy, such as yoga, hiking, swimming, skiing, or biking. Children should also be encouraged to join a sports team or another athletic extracurricular team activity to promote both positive self-esteem and peer relationships.

If a child begins to show significant changes in their weight, pre-occupation with their weight and/or food, severe restrictive or binge eating patterns, any evidence of over-exercising or purging after meals, as well as any other concerning behavior around eating and body image, professional help should be sought immediately. The first person to consult with should be your child's physician to rule out any medical causes for their behaviors and to assess their overall health. If your child is showing eating disorder symptoms with no medical cause, then they can be helped through therapy. There are many therapists who have expertise in the treatment of childhood eating disorders. For more information on eating disorder symptoms, treatment, and prevention, [www.nationaleatingdisorders.org](http://www.nationaleatingdisorders.org) is a great resource.

Although many parents may feel overwhelmed by the impact of the media on their children, they often have more power than they are aware of to support their children in developing a positive view of their bodies and eating.

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